

Disability Etiquette

Narrowing the gray zone

Due to innate differences in human nature, it is nearly impossible to develop a list, manual, or book on how to treat people based on disability. Below are suggestions on behavioral etiquette, which may or may not apply in a specific situation with a particular individual.

General Guidelines

The key thing to remember – Treat any person with a disability like any other person you might encounter unless he or she asks you to do otherwise or common sense dictates an adjustment.

Adults with disabilities are adults first and foremost. Having a disability does not make them children. Therefore, do not treat them like children.

People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can and cannot do. Don't assume that a person with a disability cannot do something, or is not interested in something because of his or her disability.

A disabled person's attitude toward assistance in various circumstances is personal and is usually influenced by his or her past experience. It is appropriate to ask someone if they require assistance, but never assume he or she will need it.

Body Language

If an individual is a quadriplegic, has limited use of his or her arms, has very short arms, has prosthesis, is blind, or has another type of disability involving his or her arms, greet them with a handshake as with any other individual. For those individuals who cannot, or do not extend a hand, touching his or her hand or shoulder may be appropriate.

People with disabilities consider their equipment part of their personal space. Avoid patting a person on the head; or touching or putting items on his or her wheelchair, scooter, or cane. Avoid pushing or moving a person's wheelchair, unless he or she asks otherwise.

If an individual is blind, deaf, or hard of hearing and is accompanied by an interpreter, extend the same courtesies by maintaining eye contact and speaking directly to the individual. If the individual uses a wheelchair, sit or kneel at his or her eye level.

When working with people with hearing or speech impairments, speak naturally and do not raise your voice as increased volume can often distort sound. Do not exaggerate lip movements, and keep hands and other things away from your mouth.

It is never appropriate to touch a working or service animal, unless the animal is off duty or if the owner asks you to exercise the animal.

Language

When you speak to people with learning disabilities or mental health issues be patient and speak in concrete terms. Situations or questions may seem obvious to you, but not to the individual with the learning disability.

Never use the word “handicap” or any of its derivatives. Use phrases such as “wheelchair user” rather than “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair bound.”

Using “people first” language is the appropriate thing to do. For example, one might say “a man who is blind” and not “the blind man.”

Don’t worry about saying “see you later” to an individual with a visual impairment; or “Did you hear about that?” to an individual with a hearing impairment. Most people with disabilities will consider your behavior and language as a reflection of your ability to see them as individuals.